



Blog Post 234 – Folk Magic on the Job

Occupational folklore and magic from jobs including athletes, merchants, sailors, sex workers, actors, and more



newworldwitchery

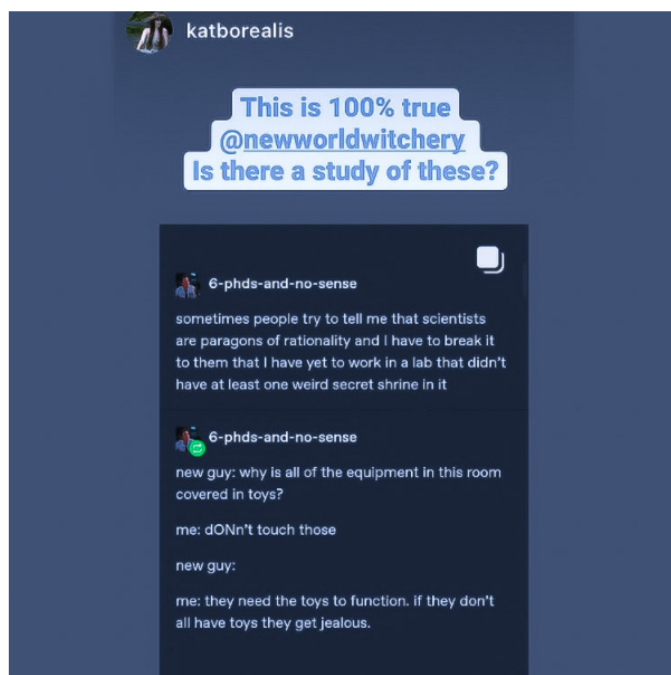
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Or, “Occupational Folk Magic”

Recently a friend of mine (Kathleen Borealis of [Borealis Meditations](#)) shared this image on Twitter:



Even the most supposedly rational among us—scientists—are, in the end, human. That means that we are prone to seeing the world through the lens of our own beliefs and folklore even when we don’t rationally believe something. We hedge our bets, because it can’t hurt to treat the electron microscope like a finicky child or say “good morning” to the Petri dishes or explain our problems to the [rubber coding duck](#) on our workstation. We might not sincerely believe any of that has a real effect, but we do at least *do* those actions, because they mean something to us at some level.

I also recently wrote a mini piece on [Instagram](#) about the importance of recognizing who the “folk” were in the folk communities from which you dip the bucket of your magic. I talked about the communities of “kinship,” which are the ones we most often think of because they relate to family, ethnicity, and even geography to some extent. But it’s important to remember that when we share an [occupation](#) with others, that makes us a part of a folk group as well. Those folk ties are called communities of “practice,” because we all share actions and behaviors. Think here of being

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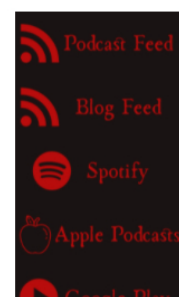
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practices, because we all share traditions and customs. A lot of being in school—you very likely had a LOT of folklore you shared with classmates about [school legends](#) (what was in that lunch meat, anyway?), [games](#) (such as fortune-telling folded paper “cootie catchers”), and even nicknames (whether you wanted them or not). You weren’t likely related by blood to most of your classmates, although you may have had a cousin or two, perhaps. You did share geography, so there’s a bit of kinship, but what bonded you was your status as a “student,” which also separated you from other folk groups in the school like “teachers” or even “parents.” Likewise, the “students” might subdivide into groups like “athletes” or “theatre kids” (my group). And even then, there might be “swim team” versus “cheerleaders” or “actors” versus “tech crew.”

So what do these divisions have to do with magic? Well, each folk group generally comes up with its own folk beliefs, and those folk beliefs are often the root of the practices that become magic in the group. When you have an occupation that takes up a good quarter to a third of your waking hours, those groups become incredibly important and the magic you share with those groups can be some of the most relevant magic you do.

Today, I wanted to look at a couple of occupations and their folk magic, so we can see how membership in these folk groups shapes the way the magic works.



Athletes

Since I mentioned school athletes already (and we happen to be in the midst of an Olympic season), let’s begin there. One of the best academic explorations of folk magic in occupations is George Gmelch’s essay “[Baseball Magic](#),” in which the anthropologist looks at the superstitions and rituals of various baseball players. For example, one infielder maintained a ritual of keeping a cheese sandwich in his back pocket in order to ensure his performance would remain consistent throughout a game. This might seem strange, but usually these rituals are borne from observing when a particularly remarkable streak of luck strikes and asking “what was different this time?” So when Wade Boggs noticed that he got multiple hits in his rookie season on the days he ate chicken before a game, he adopted that as a magical practice and ate chicken as often as possible before games. Objects in baseball and other sports can also be seen as animate and empowered. Honus Wagner believed, for example, that every bat only had one hundred hits (he admittedly played when wooden bats were the norm). If batting was going poorly, managers might rattle the bats in the dugout in an effort to “wake them up.” Even the hats players wear can become magical, as seen in the “rally cap” ritual where players off the field will turn their hats upside down and inside out (or “bill up”) to reverse bad luck during a game. Hats are also a central concern of rodeo riders, who won’t wear a new hat for a competition for fear of bad luck. Many also have a preferred “lucky hat” they wear only when riding competitively. Racing drivers have rules about not turning wheels in a parked car (similar to rules about not rocking an empty cradle) and not thing a picture right before a race, as either could lead to a dangerous or deadly crash. There are some sexist practices about racers’ wives not being allowed in the pit or being forbidden to wear green to a race to stave off bad luck, too, but then they also generally avoid eating peanuts in the pit for the same reason ([Penrod](#)). Some other magical beliefs in the world of athletics:

- Most athletes won’t shave right before a game, for fear it will remove their luck
- Batters (in baseball) and boxers will both spit in their hands to increase their strength during a game or match

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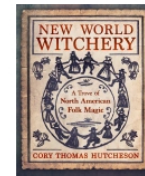


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- Some athletes will wear a snakeskin around their waist to add strength or agility to their performance during a game (this is easier in the era of wearing snakeskin belts)
- Seeing white horses or white cars before a ball game is usually good luck
- Taking crossed game gear (such as bats or golf clubs lying crossed on the ground) leads to bad luck Wearing lucky clothes is fairly common in a lot of sports, but many athletes have a pair of socks or an article of clothing that is lucky and washing it is forbidden (for fear of washing away the luck) ([Brown](#), vol 6)



Sailors and Fishers

I've covered a lot of [maritime beliefs](#) and superstitions, as well as some of the magical rituals associated with life on the sea, in other posts and [podcast episodes](#). But there is never a shortage of folk magic in this field, largely because being out on the open ocean is a very risky occupation, and as both Gmelch and his predecessor anthropologist [Bronislaw Malinowski](#) have noted, superstition and magic are often proportional to the risk associated with any particular task. Some of the lore associated with working the sea:

- It's bad luck for a new ship or a freshly painted one to scratch its paint along the dock
- Many people know the phrase "rats leave a sinking ship," so sailors would often pay attention to the behavior of rodents on board for signs and omens of what was coming
- Whistling on a ship was bad luck, especially because a sailor could accidentally whistle up a gale-force wind
- The albatross is a well-known omen on boats and should be treated with respect (think only of the woes that befall the titular character in Coolidge's "[Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)"), but it's also considered very bad luck to kill a dolphin or porpoise, because they were thought to be hosts to the souls of lost sailors.
- If a bird lands on your boat while you're on a fishing run, you should return to shore and try again another day ([Mullen](#))
- Fishing trips should never start on a Friday or they will come to a bad end (either a poor catch or worse)
- Both Catholic and Protestant fishers may carry a medal or token of St. Andrew to ensure a good catch
- It is thought that fishing between the hours of midnight and 3 a.m. is unlucky, because that is the 'fishes' time' ([Shearer](#))
- Coins are often installed at various spots throughout the boat to bring good luck. For example, a silver dollar or fifty-cent piece is frequently placed under the main mast for this purpose
- Two rather strange taboos are found among Texas fishers: carrying a black

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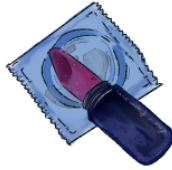
suitcase onboard and saying the word “alligator,” both of which are thought to bring extraordinary bad luck (I bet Captain Hook at least would agree with the latter custom)



Merchants & Retail Workers

While retail and merchandise sales is a fairly broad category, it's also one that has a good bit of superstition, folk magic, and ritual associated with it. Many people have gone into a business to find a framed piece of currency somewhere behind the cash register or along the entry wall, the “first dollar” made by the business. It is honored and never spent, so as to prevent the business from going under at some point in the future. There are lots of other folk beliefs and workings that have to do with increasing business and staving off bad luck (or bad customers):

- Anything done to grow a business during the waxing moon is more likely to come to fruition, according to Ozark belief ([Weston](#))
- Making the first sale of the day was vital. Jewish merchants held the belief that the first customer of the day must be sold, even if at a loss or something insignificant, so as to provide good sales the rest of the day.
- Business deals should not be done on Friday or they will come to a bad end, and working on Sunday is also bad luck (if you've worked retail or service industry, you already know this is true given how many people seem to come straight from church to undertip or demand special treatment from cashiers)
- Sweeping dirt out the back door of a business is sweeping away all of its luck (Penrod). Similarly sweeping after dark was considered unlucky for business (Brown vol. 6)
- Money stolen from a business could carry a curse, especially if the business owner was honest. One story from [Zora Neale Hurston's](#) fieldwork reports of a woman who ran a little cigar shop so honestly she usually just left the money out on the counter. A sailor came in and stole the money, then returned to his ship. She rowed out in a dinghy to warn the captain and the sailor that if the money wasn't returned it would do the thief great harm. They couldn't find where he'd stashed it so they sent her away, but the sailor failed to show up for his next watch. They found him dead in his cabin, the money clenched in his hand. The captain, of course, immediately sent the money back to the woman as quickly as possible
- If a man's beard is of a different color than his hair, the shopkeep should expect shady dealing
- If someone rattles money in their pocket while shopping or haggling, they aren't to be trusted either (both of these last two are [Ozark beliefs](#))
- Sprinkling alfalfa and Irish moss in the corners of the shop is thought to bring in business. Similarly, keeping a Rose of Jericho behind the cash register counter and sprinkling the water over the doorstep of the business is thought to spur more customers to come in and spend
- Zora Neale Hurston notes that a mixture of water, honey, and Japanese Fast Luck powder could be sprinkled at the entrance to the business in the morning or at midnight to draw large crowds of customers
- Putting a golden coin (like a golden dollar) somewhere where the sun can shine on it is thought to bring more money your way; silver money shown to the moon will do the same



Sex Workers

If risk and reward breed magic, it's not surprising that sex work has a number of enchantment rituals within it. Those can range from ways to attract customers and clients to ways to protect oneself in dangerous situations or retain the money earned. Some things, like wearing red clothes or keeping red lights or lanterns on a front porch, are fairly well-known because they are thought to inspire lustful feelings and also to identify potential sex workers to interested clients. Other magical lore associated with sex work:

- A sex worker should tear the corners of any cash money received, both to avoid any unwanted bad luck and as a way to magically stave off pregnancy (NOTE: this is NOT scientifically sound birth control, but a folkloric tidbit... please listen to medical advice about preventing pregnancy and STIs first and foremost)
- One recipe found in Hurston's notes says a mixture of lavender, geranium, and Van Van (a spicy sweet blend involving lemongrass and ginger or galangal) could be sprinkled in the house or bed where sex work was to take place to help generate more clients
- The evergreen boldo leaf can be sprinkled around the space where sex work is performed in order to prevent harm coming to those within; similarly carrying a buckeye was thought to stave off STIs as well (but again, this is NOT medical advice)
- Carrying a Jezebel Root (a variety of iris), especially one dressed with sexual fluids, allows a sex worker to draw in the type of clients they like best and keep them docile and satisfied
- Burning a shoe sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar would help draw customers to a house of sex workers ([yronwode](#))



Actors

Perhaps one of the most superstitious professions is the world of the stage and screen. Plenty of people know about various taboos behind the footlights, such as avoiding the name of a certain Shakespearean "Scottish play" while in the actual theatre or avoiding the phrase "good luck!" in favor of the more dismal "break a leg!" Plenty of other acting-based folk practices might fall under the heading of "magic" as well:

- Not only the "Scottish play" brings misfortune. Unless you're actually performing Shakespeare, even quoting the Bard can bring bad luck in a theatre!
- Like race car drivers, actors shouldn't eat peanuts backstage (although there are probably sanitary reasons for this, plus if you've ever had a salty

peanut stuck in your throat you can probably imagine how difficult a soliloquy might be)

- There are lots of clothing-based taboos: ostrich feathers on a costume are bad luck, as are leaving your shoes or hat on a bed or dressing table
- Spitting on your makeup brushes before using them ensures good performances and audiences
- There's a ritual of lighting a candle in the dressing rooms just before going onstage and leaving it burning during the opening night performance (obviously dangerous, but if you've got an awesome stage manager who can spare a tech to keep things safe, it might work out)
- Those who are so inclined might carry a medal or card for St. Genesius for luck and blessing during the run of a play

There are no shortage of job-related spells, beliefs, charms, and lore, of course. Some additional occupational magical beliefs:

- Electricians will carry marjoram and feverfew as a way to deflect potential electrocution (yronwode p. 132).
- Nurses and public safety service workers often swear that full moons bring out the wildest, strangest, and most intense cases (or at least the largest quantity of ER or imperiled people each month)
- Coal miners will burn the hat of someone who has recently become a new parent to provide protection and blessing to their family; there are also sexist beliefs similar to those found at race tracks about keeping women away from the mines/workplace
- Pilots—like racers—won't take photos right before a flight, and they usually avoid allowing their spouse or significant other watch them take off to prevent any accidents or crashes
- Seamstresses and tailors won't do repairs on their own clothes, especially not while they are wearing them, for fear of bringing bad luck (even death)
- Cooks and chefs won't keep parsley growing indoors because it can invite death into the kitchen or restaurant



There are probably hundreds of bits of folk magic applicable to every job or occupation you could imagine. I recall working at a movie theater and having beliefs about playing movies to empty theaters inviting spirits to be there, for example (so we'd often let someone clock out and watch at least part of a movie if they wanted to so we could avoid that situation). There are also things like "cursed films" that inevitably bring disaster when screened (The Exorcist and The Omen both have reputations like this, although the curses associated with them tend to focus more on the curses on those involved with making the film).

And all of this isn't even tapping into the numerous magically-oriented occupations from fairy tales: bakers, spinners, soldiers (who we cover in one of our earlier posts), and so forth. We've tackled a number of those occupations in a couple of podcasts previously, but even then we could easily fill another several episodes discussing the topic.

What about your occupation? Do you have any magical lore associated with your profession or job? We'd love to hear it if you do! Feel free to share in the comments or send us an email if you'd like to share!

Whatever work you do, we hope you make it magical! Thanks so much for reading!

-Cory

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